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ABSTRACT

The University of Arkansas at Little Rock Scholars Program is an honors curriculum for outstanding students. Based on the rationale that overseas language study in an appropriate cultural setting can be an exciting and efficient way to acquire cultural understanding and language proficiency in general, and oral fluency in particular, the new program combines a summer of language study abroad with an oral proficiency requirement, satisfied when students reach Intermediate-Mid proficiency on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language/Educational Testing Service (ACTFL/ETS) rating scale. The program is a cooperative cross-faculty effort designed to attract talented in-state students who might otherwise be lured to out-of-state schools. Twenty freshmen began the program in 1984. Problems and concerns in program development and implementation included advising errors, loss of eligible students, and the need to use an oral interview test. Returning scholars were tested by certified raters during a proficiency testing workshop held on campus. Of the 12 students tested, four were rated Intermediate-Mid or higher. Two must be retested. Improvements are being made in the program for current and future cohorts. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Cultural Understanding, Oral Proficiency, and Study Abroad:

Getting It All Together

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As anyone caught up in the enthusiasm of the oral proficiency movement knows, recent articles and workshops for familiarizing or training interviewers frequently trace the history of oral proficiency evaluation from Babel up to the present. And any discussion on the topic is incomplete without reference to John Carroll's study reporting on the second-language skills of college foreign language majors. (Carroll, 1967) While generally remembered today because it revealed that majors nearing graduation attained at best a "2" or "2-plus" rating on the government's oral (now ILR) scale, the Carroll study brought out other salient points that have received less attention and thus may be foggier in our minds. Perhaps a quick review might be in order.

We recall that Carroll divided a population of nearly 3,000 college French, German, Russian, and Spanish majors into groups, each composed of students sharing common background experiences. One consisted of all foreign language majors who had never been abroad. A second contained only those who had spent a summer overseas or taken a short tour abroad, and a third was composed of those spending an entire academic year overseas. Results of listening comprehension tests administered to all three groups revealed that students spending even a brief period abroad had significantly higher scores than those who had never traveled. those spending a year abroad scored even better.

Another point stressed by Carroll was that students commencing language study at an early age and persisting throughout college had a distinct advantage over later starters. Such findings persuaded him that the

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two variables most strongly associated with second-language skill attainment were (1) the amount of time spent in the target language environment, and (2) the time when language study began. In other words, an early start and perseverance in the language along with meaningful exposure in an environment where the language is used naturally for communication proved to be crucial factors for optimal acquisition.

In the two decades since the Carroll report, others have also documented, both anecdotally and empirically, gains of dramatic proportions in the language skills of students returning from overseas. In 1975, Hoeh and Spuck examined the effects of a brief travel-study venture on the foreign language skills of fifteen high school French students, all with varying backgrounds ranging from two to five years of classroom instruction. Results of testing showed significant gains were made in listening and reading skills to the degree that listening comprehension scores improved by three-fifths of a year over traditional classroom norms and reading comprehension improved by one-half year. (Hoeh & Spuck, 1975)

In a more recent study, Armstrong (1982) tested sixty U.S. students in listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Testing was accomplished preceding and following their participation in a seven-week intensive language program in Mexico. Measured gains in three of the skill areas—listening, reading, and writing—exceeded gains normally expected in a full year of classroom Spanish. Oral gains, always more difficult to quantify, were measured on a five-point scale by a system of teacher ratings. Students were evaluated at the beginning of their study abroad and again at the conclusion. Since each rating represented a broad range of proficiency, precise pinpointing of oral gains was not possible. More interesting and impressive, however, were students' own perceptions as to their oral skill development while abroad.

Three to four years following their initial sojourn, 180 returnees who had studied overseas while still in high school were surveyed with regard to the impact of that early experience. (Armstrong, 1984) Of 124 responding, 73 percent reported that as undergraduates they continued studying the language of the region visited. Moreover, one third began the study of additional languages in college and an equal number had traveled abroad again within three years of their initial experience overseas. On an open-ended item, a majority of respondents pointed out that the greatest lasting benefit of the study abroad had been the increased language fluency acquired as a result of their cultural immersion and language exposure in the target culture.

Other studies cite similarly interesting results. Most recently, Koester (1985) reported that among 8,000 U.S. students surveyed upon returning, 60 percent planned additional overseas travel or study within the next two

years. Furthermore, they felt that their first experience abroad had made them more conscious of international events while improving their knowledge of U.S. culture, to say nothing of their language development. Baker (1983), likewise, observed that returnees from B.Y.U. overseas study programs not only became more confident of their language skills, but also were more interested in taking additional language courses. Lamet and Lamet (1982) found that many students thought that skills attained abroad enhanced their job potential. More than half believed that overseas experience confirmed their career plans, while as many as 40 percent of the returnees in another study became language majors or had double majors that included a foreign language. (Armstrong, 1984)

Against this backdrop of evidence portraying many of the positive benefits accruing from study abroad, we are witnessing a surge of recent national and regional reports supporting the need for more humanities and multicultural experiences in the college curriculum.[1] The spotlight is frequently on foreign languages and international studies. At the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, the administration has issued a call to internationalize the campus; committees are scurrying about to review and revise the curriculum; and a Blue Ribbon Panel of educators and experts, citizens and consultants, avidly anticipates fulfilling its charge to define the parameters of the baccalaureate degree for students of the twenty-first century. Everyone is in a revival spirit, and as a result, we see new programs emerging and new emphases challenging time-worn ideas.

One manifestation of this new outlook is evidenced in the development of the UALR Scholars Program, an honors curriculum for outstanding students. Based on the rationale that overseas language study in an appropriate cultural setting can be an exciting and efficient way to acquire cultural understanding and language proficiency in general, and oral fluency in particular, this new program which began in 1984-85, combines a summer of language study abroad with an oral proficiency requirement to be satisfied when students reach Intermediate-Mid proficiency on the ACTFL/ETS rating scale.[2]

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[1] See *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education*, final report of the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, U.S. Department of Education, October 1984, and William J. Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education*, published by NEH in November 1984. Also of interest are regional reports such as the Southern Regional Education Board's 1985 report entitled *Access to Quality Undergraduate Education* prepared by SREB's Commission for Educational Quality.

[2] Performance descriptions for each level are given in the publication *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines: A Design for Measuring and Communicating Foreign Language Proficiency*, which is available from ACTFL, 579 Broadway, Hastings-on-Hudson, New York 10706

Still in its infancy, the Scholars Program model is the result of cooperation among a cross section of faculty appointed to design a scholarship program that would attract talented in-state students who are frequently lured to more prestigious out-of-state institutions. Program creators were eager for participants to have the opportunity to develop social and survival skills in a second language, yet they felt compelled to suggest a modest proficiency goal since many Arkansas students arrive on campus with scanty or no background in a foreign language. The idea of a proficiency-based requirement, in itself, represented both a challenge and an innovative step forward for the University and for Arkansas, a step they fortunately dared to take. The language and overseas study components emanating from committee efforts and deliberations are as follows:

> In the course of study, each Scholar will attain an Intermediate-Mid proficiency rating on the academic ACTFL/ETS scale as determined by an oral examination. This proficiency will enable the student to satisfy some survival needs and some limited social demands in a country where English is not the native language.
>
> During the summer between the first and second year each Scholar will have an opportunity to participate in a study experience abroad with the goal of firsthand experience in both another culture and a language other than English. If the student is unable to participate in an overseas program, she or he may satisfy the language requirement by enrollment in a language program approved by the Coordinator of the Scholars Program, in consultation with the Department of Foreign Languages. A scholarship will be available to all students for language study abroad.

With the above requirement firmly in place, the Scholars Program became a reality in the fall of 1984 with the arrival of twenty eager freshmen participants. The first year was not without the usual problems. Since Scholars were taking a formidable array of courses, which included topics such as History of Ideas, Rhetoric and Communication, Science and Society, and other interdisciplinary offerings instead of standard fare, they faced a substantial academic challenge. And while program framers felt they had been careful in drafting an appropriate language requirement, academic advisors failed to recommend to entering Scholars that they enroll in foreign language courses in preparation for their summer abroad, which was to follow the freshman year. The advising error was discovered at mid-semester, too late to rectify entirely. Consequently, some students did not begin language study until the second semester. Nevertheless,

program officials allowed their participation in the overseas experience while vowing that all future Scholars would be advised to begin or continue foreign language study upon entering the University.

Following the first academic year, two Scholars withdrew from the program and others failed to maintain their required grade point average, leaving twelve eligible for participation in overseas study. The University of Arkansas at Little Rock has no programs operating in France or Germany and no new sites were established to provide language learning opportunities abroad. Instead, students were simply piggybacked onto programs of other universities, such as the Rutgers German Program in Konstanz and an intensive French program in Caen.

Even before Scholars departed for their summer study in Europe, the concern on campus was that returning Scholars would need to be tested by an oral interview. The responsibility weighed heavily on faculty in the Department of Foreign Languages, because in Arkansas there were no certified testers. In fact, at this writing, there are still no certified testers in Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri, or Oklahoma. While progress is being made towards their training and certification, much remains to be done nationally. In Spanish, for example, there are but thirty-eight testers nationwide. In order to obviate this problem in Arkansas, UALR's Department of Foreign Languages secured a training grant from a campus-based group, which enabled it to host an ACTFL Oral Proficiency Testers Workshop in the fall of 1985. Twenty-four colleagues participated, ten of whom were UALR faculty. At this writing all are in the post-workshop phase of their training and many hope to become certified testers in ESL, French, German, and Spanish.

During the four-day workshop UALR Scholars returning from abroad were interviewed and rated by certified testers and their trainees. Ratings ranged from Novice-Mid, for one student who had taken only one semester of French prior to going overseas, to Intermediate-High, for a student with some high school French and two college courses in French. Results were as follows:

Student	*Rating*
Alice	Novice-Mid
Betty	Novice-High
Carmen	Intermediate-Low
Donna	Intermediate-Low
Eric	Intermediate-Low
Fran	Intermediate-Low
Gary	Intermediate-Mid

Hannah	Intermediate-Mid
Irma	Intermediate-Mid
Jack	Intermediate-High
Keith	unratable sample
Larry	unratable sample

Three students came out on target with Intermediate-Mid ratings. Two were unratable because of errors in the interviewer's elicitation procedure. They now await retesting. Others not meeting the requirement have been advised to continue foreign language study until they reach Intermediate-Mid proficiency.

Finally, with regard to the new Scholars class entering the University in the fall of 1986, all but two enrolled in foreign language classes. While anticipating study next summer in Salzburg or Strasbourg, they are also benefiting from advice of their sophomore peers in the Scholars Program—advice from Arkansas travelers who, as expected, are already discussing plans for further ventures abroad as soon as circumstances allow.

In an effort to better prepare participants for their early overseas experience, the Department of Foreign Languages is now contemplating offering intensive language sequences for future Scholars. As the program grows to accommodate as many as eighty participants, many talented Arkansas students can expect greater opportunities for "getting it all together"—cultural understanding, oral proficiency, and study abroad.

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